

Hong Kongers defy mask ban in protest

Written by Taipei Times

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Photo: EPA-EFE

Hong Kong was rocked by fresh violence yesterday as tens of thousands hit the streets to defy a ban on masks, sparking clashes with police, street fights and vandalism across the strife-torn territory.

Large crowds marched through torrential rain in peaceful but unsanctioned rallies on both sides of Victoria Harbour, condemning the government for deploying emergency powers to ban masks at public gatherings.

However, violence erupted as police dispersed crowds with tear gas, and then battled hardcore protesters in multiple locations.

In one incident, a taxi driver was beaten bloody in the district of Sham Shui Po after he drove into a crowd that had surrounded his car.

“Two girls were hit by the car and one girl was trapped between the car and a shop,” said a witness, who gave his surname as Wong, adding that the crowd pushed the car off the injured woman.

Volunteer medics treated both the driver and the injured women before paramedics and police arrived, while protesters smashed the taxi.

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Hospital authorities said three people had been admitted in serious condition.

Earlier, a crowd ransacked nearby government offices, while multiple Chinese-owned banks and subway stations were vandalized across the territory.

Activists have staged three straight days of flash mob rallies and sprees of vandalism after Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam (林鄭月娥) outlawed face coverings by protesters, invoking colonial-era emergency powers not used for half a century.

Pro-democracy lawmakers yesterday morning went to Hong Kong's High Court seeking an injunction against the ban, arguing the emergency powers bypassed the legislature and contravened the territory's Basic Law, its mini-constitution.

However, a senior judge dismissed their case.

Opposition lawmakers said the use of the old law has deepened the crisis.

"I would say this is one of the most important constitutional cases in the history of Hong Kong," lawmaker Dennis Kwok (郭榮鏗) told reporters before yesterday's ruling.

The law allows Lam to make "any regulations whatsoever" during a time of public danger, and she has warned that she would use the powers to introduce new regulations if the unrest did not abate.

However, the ban has done little to calm tensions.

"If Carrie Lam wants to de-escalate the situation, this is not the right way," a 19-year-old protester who gave his first name as Corey said as he marched under a forest of umbrellas on

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the main island.

More than half the territory's subway stations, which were shut down on Friday night, remained shuttered, many of them in the heart of the main tourist districts.

Some lines were later closed entirely as violence worsened.

Meanwhile, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) garrison in the territory yesterday warned that protesters could be arrested for targeting its barracks with laser lights.

In the first direct interaction between the PLA and protesters, the PLA raised a yellow flag with the arrest warning written in large letters.

Police use similar color-coded flags to warn people to disperse.

As a few hundred protesters shone laser lights on the barrack's walls, troops in fatigues on the roof of the building shone spotlights at protesters and used binoculars and cameras to monitor the crowd.

In related news, the Chinese Basketball Association yesterday said it was suspending "exchanges and cooperation" with the Houston Rockets basketball team, after Rockets general manager Daryl Morey took to Twitter to support the Hong Kong protests.

"Houston Rockets general manager Morey publicly made an inappropriate comment related to Hong Kong," it said in a statement on Sina Weibo. "The Chinese Basketball Association strongly opposes this and will suspend exchanges and cooperation."

Morey's original Twitter message on Friday included an image captioned: "Fight For Freedom."

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Stand With Hong Kong.”

The post has since been removed and team owner Tilman Fertitta went on Twitter to distance the team from the statement.

“Daryl Morey does not speak for the Houston Rockets,” he said on Saturday.

The Rockets are popular in China, partly because they drafted the Chinese player Yao Ming (姚明) in 2002, who became a star for the team.

Additional reporting by Reuters

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